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ABSTRACT

In a study of features that seem to be typical of children's conversations, 10 Finnish preschool children's conversations were videotaped and audiotaped over a period of 10 hours. The children were taped in conversation, play, fairy tale, and eating situations. Among the findings are that all children enjoy playing with language, but some initiate the playing more frequently than others and some are eager to continue. Also, some want to play but stop when the playing begins to get too dangerous, frightening, or impossible. Most of the playing with language is found to be social, including the use of colorful descriptive words, word variety through rhythm or intonation, rhyming, and language containing something dramatic. It is concluded that a child's resources extend beyond the phonological and lexico-grammatical means; gesticulation and movement play an important role in communicating a child's intentions. Contains 6 references. (LB)

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SPECIAL FEATURES IN CHILDREN'S CONVERSATIONS

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Introduction

The focus of child language investigation has followed the general main lines of other linguistic research: eg. the spirit of transformational-generative linguistics is very visible in the studies of the sixties. The investigation of semantics, which moved into focus during the seventies, was an important period for conversational investigations, because word combinations are not interpretable without the context. According to McTear (1985:7) this ability to interpret word combinations was one way in which conversational data became relevant for child language researchers.

The notion that the meaning of a behavior depends on the context in which it is used is the essence of pragmatics. According to the pragmatic perspective, semantic, syntactic, and phonological analyses of an utterance are insufficient for determining the utterance's meaning. One must also consider who used that utterance with whom under what circumstances. (Becker 1984:3.)

The nature of the investigation of child language has often been more pragmatic than other areas of linguistic investigations. Observations of the development of child language have been made in natural speech contexts and the audio- and videotaped data which have been used with corpus-investigations are usually from natural conversational environments.

Recently, during the seventies and eighties, conversational child language data have been mainly used for the investigation of the mother tongue and of the development of the conversational skills of children. So the main part of the data collected and published so far contains conversations between children and either their mothers or other adults. There are also recordings of two children conversing with each other. Some recordings have also been made about the groups of three or more children engaged together in conversation.

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One of the topics of my thesis is the analysis of features which seem to be typical of childrens's conversations. The conversations were both video- and audiotaped in a kindergarten in Oulu. The duration of the material is 10 hours. There were 10 children aged three and four in the taped situations. During the recordings the children were divided into two groups. Both of the groups took part in various situations: conversation situations, play situations, fairy tale situations and eating situations.

Language play

One of the most characteristic features in my data is play with language. Very frequently children are amusing themselves with language. Garvey (1977:38) says that as soon as a child has learned how something is supposed to be, then turning it upside down or distorting it in some way becomes a source of fun. This view is confirmed by my data.

In my data all the children enjoy playing with language in one way or another, but some children initiate the playing more frequently than others and some are eager to continue. There are also some children who want to play but when the playing begins to become too dangerous, frightening or impossible, they want to stop the play. So we have at least three different role-types in the playing situations.

Garvey (1977) has noticed that language provides opportunities for play at various levels of its structure (ie. phonology, grammar, semantics) and in its pragmatic or functional aspects. Even the processes of speaking or of uttering sounds or noises offer opportunities for play. Garvey has distinguished firstly play with noises and sounds and social play. Then she has distinguished three types of social play: spontaneous rhyming and word play, play with fantasy and nonsense, play with speech acts and discourse conventions.

In my material almost all the playing with language is social. Typical of the social language play of my material are descriptive words belonging to colourful language used also by adults in natural speech events. If one of the children says a nice descriptive word, it is typical that another child repeats it

in their following utterance. The common type of play with onomatopoeic words is also play with sounds.

Sometimes the play on one word is so fascinating that children will use prosodic features, so that rhythm, the lengthening of sounds, different stress patterns and intonation give variety to the word. Generally the word may also be divided into syllable sequences. During that kind of play the word may lose its meaning and is only a combination of different sounds.

Some investigators (eg. Weir 1962 and Clark 1978) have observed that young children (eg. 2-year-olds) often engage in "sound substitution drills" in which they produce sequences of rhyming sound patterns. There is, however, no particular reason to believe that this early "rhyming" involves an analysis of sound sequences into phonological units. The 2-year-old could equally well be manipulating larger (eg. syllabic) units. Further, this early spontaneous "rhyming" may well not involve children's being aware of the phonological properties of the sound sequences they are producing. That is, 2-year-olds may produce sequences of sounds that do in fact rhyme, but it is unclear that they know that *that* is what they are doing. (Hakes 1980:34.)

Hakes (1980:32) notes that being aware of the phonemic structure of spoken words or syllables appears to be beyond the capabilities of 4-year-olds and is generally, though not universally, within the capabilities of children by the time they reach the end of the first grade. Being aware of the syllabic structure of spoken words is apparently a capability that develops rather earlier.

In the following example the child bases the word play on the almost similar word shape:

Ju: oho! miten se näkkäri tuli *suusta* pois!
'How did the crispbread come out of my mouth?'

M: miten näkkäri tuli *puusta* pois!
'How did the crispbread come of of the tree?'

Language play which contains something dramatic is very popular in my data. For example, there is a long discussion about broken legs. But then also other parts of the body, an arm, a head, an ear, an eye, a teeth, even the tongue, all

begin to break and fall off. When children choose to add new words, it seems to be usual that they stay in the same semantic field all the time. The order is not always systematic: a less dramatic word may follow the most dramatic word, although there are also events in which the structure is systematically expansive.

There are also some ritual games in my material. A typical ritual game is the one in which children show with their fingers how old they are:

Ju: Taina, by the way, are you by the way so?
(Ju raises three fingers)

T: (shows three fingers)

Ju: I am too, as well.

J: so am I (laughing)

There are also differences between children with respect to the topics they choose. For example, a boy loves to change the topic or create a new topic around words which are denied or unsuitable for the topics of kindergarten conversations. The structure of turn-taking is then almost always as follows:

J: tässä erilaisia puita kasvaa.
'All kinds of trees grow here.'

Ju: erilaisia *kakkaa* kasvaa.
'All kinds of poo-poo grows here.'

T: *hihih.*

In the previous example there is almost always the same girl who is giving the supportive follow-up in the form of a laugh or giggle.

Some other features

One of the typical features of children is their unlimited imagination. The use of imagination is also a charasteristic feature of the conversations in my data. Here is one example of imaginative language use:

Ju: jos ha-, pottu, pottu, ainaski, tul-,
jos pottu tulliis mun kimppuun ja ois ihmine,
pottu niin, niin sitte tulis ja ottasiv veitten
ja sillä stops. mh. ja söisin sen.

'if a potato, potato, at least came –
and was a human being, so the potato,
so it would come, and I would take a knife
and with it stops. mh. and I would eat it.'

The children continue this discussion in a very dramatic way; all types of exaggeration seem to amuse children very much.

Many acts which are quite rare in adults' normal conversation are quite usual in children's discussion. For example it is not difficult to find turns in which the children are accusing or scorning each other - until someone changes the serious topic into eg. language play again.

Another typical feature in children's conversation is lively gesticulation and movement. It is often said that Finns are quite static when talking. However, Finnish children are not static. A child may, eg., start by telling that his father has a big belly (at the same time he shows it). Another boy continues, saying that his father has a still bigger belly (he shows the bigger belly). The next child climbs onto a chair and displays the size of her father's belly from there. Yet another child wants to say that her mother's belly is the biggest of all and she climbs onto the table to show the belly from there.

So it should be emphasized that a child's resources extend beyond the phonological and lexico-grammatical means; gesticulation and movement play a very important role in communicating his meaning intentions.

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